PLAN FOR INCREASING ACCESS
TO PRESCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES IN ALEXANDRIA

A REPORT OF THE EARLY CHILDHOOD COMMISSION
UNIVERSAL ACCESS WORK GROUP

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INTRODUCTION

In 2005, the Alexandria City Council and School Board passed a joint resolution asking the Alexandria Early Childhood Commission (ECC) to develop a plan for increasing access to preschool opportunities in Alexandria. In response, the Commission hosted a community dialogue on universal access to preschool on November 5 of that year. Based on the results of that meeting and of follow-up discussions at Commission meetings, the ECC developed an interim report that was submitted to Council and the School Board on March 6, 2006. The ECC then appointed a planning committee to establish a work group to address the issue. The Chamber of Commerce agreed to act as co-sponsor and offered space in the Chamber offices for the monthly meetings. The first meeting of the Universal Access to Preschool Work Group (Work Group) was held on March 29 and it was decided that the group would meet monthly with the goal of developing a plan to be submitted to City Council. A membership list is included as Attachment 1.

In the meantime, Virginia Governor Tim Kaine appointed the Start Strong Council which is studying the issue of pre-Kindergarten and will make recommendations to the Governor as to what the Virginia pre-K program should look like and what the funding levels should be. Alexandria City Councilman Rob Krupicka is a member of the Council and reports back to the Work Group on the status of the state plan. The first meeting of the Council was held on June 21. The Governor has also held three pre-K summits targeting different audiences from throughout the state to educate and to energize decision-makers at all levels on the subject of early care and education.

The following report includes the recommendations of the Work Group, a survey of existing programs and services, identified gaps in services and a review of issues that impact the development of a plan to address the goal of increased access to preschool programs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) *That the FY 2008 City budget include increased funding for the Children's Fund sufficient to address the sustainability of current early childhood programs which have lost funding or had funding eroded by inflation over*

the past five years and to address federal budget cuts in the Child Day Care Fee System

Children's Fund programs were surveyed to determine their financial status. All programs reported that over the past two to five years, they had either lost funding through the expiration of grants or the loss of state or federal funding. Many had lost ground because their funding through the Children's Fund had either decreased or remained flat. As a result, these programs have not been able to meet the costs of normal and expected increases in salaries, benefits and other administrative expenses and most have had to cut back on services in order to balance their budgets. In addition, many programs report having difficulty in recruiting staff because the salaries they are able to offer are not competitive.

Early childhood programs in Alexandria, as in most communities throughout the country, are supported through a variety of funding streams made up of federal, State and local dollars. Some programs like Alexandria Head Start/Early Head Start are supported almost entirely by federal dollars. The Virginia Preschool Initiative is a blending of federal, state, local, foundation and fundraising dollars. Attachment 2 shows in greater detail the individual programs, the services they provide and their sources of funding.

The Alexandria Children's Fund provides just over $1 million in local funds (Attachment 3) to support organizations that provide a quality early childhood education and related services to at-risk children from birth to five. To access the funds, child care centers must serve at-risk children and be accredited through the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Children's Fund dollars provide a base level of funding to programs that have been around for a number of years and have documented their effectiveness. As a result, very few dollars are available to new programs.

The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) is a federally funded program that provides child care assistance to eligible families through three separate funding streams with different eligibility requirements, TANF, Transitional and Child Day Care Fee System Child Care. The reality of the unpredictability of child care funding recently struck home when the Virginia Department of Social Services notified localities on May 9 that the federal pass-through allocation that many jurisdictions had been drawing down using local dollars had been cut by 82% as of June 1, 2006, because of a projected increase in the need for funds in the two mandated programs (TANF and TCC).

The Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI) provides funding for early childhood education services for at-risk four year olds through the Virginia Department of Education. Funding is based on the composite index, which is 0.8 in Alexandria. This means that Alexandria must provide a $4 match for every dollar the City receives from VPI. In FY 2006, Alexandria drew down $208,440 of the

approximately $800,000 available and served 193 children. The match for those dollars was $834,000 and was made up of city dollars from the Children's Fund, foundations and fundraising. To qualify for the remainder of the funds, Alexandria would have to identify an additional $2.4 million in local match, including $1.8 million in cash.

One of the issues identified in the interim report submitted in March was the need to ensure that existing programs that have proven their effectiveness will be able to maintain their current level of services. With the cuts in the CCDF and foundation dollars and no increases in the Children's Fund, the programs must identify other sources of revenue.

Programs currently receiving Children's Fund dollars were asked to provide the Work Group information about their highest level of service over the past five years and the cost, if any, to restore their services to that level. It should be noted that this is not a comparison of comparable services and their cost. For example, an early childhood classroom that operates five days a week at least 9.5 months per year cannot be compared to programs that provide comprehensive services with weekly or monthly contacts. Both services are necessary but not comparable in cost or in outcomes.

SUSTAINABILITY UNMET NEEDS OF EXISTING PROGRAMS		
PROGRAM	**UNMET NEED**	**COST**
Alexandria Resource Mothers (NOVUL)	<Restore 25 teen mothers to caseloads and lower caseload size from 40 to 25 which would restore the level of quality of services. <Waiting list – 20 teens	$339,500
Healthy Families Alexandria (NVFS)	<Restore HFA to pre-2004 level: 3 additional family support workers and services to 75 additional pregnant and parenting moms, including teens. <Unable to serve 211 eligible families in FY06	$169,600
Family Support Project (Social Workers on site in participating accredited centers)	<Cost of project currently borne by centers which makes it difficult for programs to offer competitive salaries for social work or teaching staff.	$123,378
Child and Family Network Centers	<Restore three classrooms and services to 48 children that were cut in FY 2007 <Waiting list - 85	$322,000
SCAN (Stop Child Abuse Now of Northern Virginia)	<Restore one parenting class <Waiting list - 20	$9,800
COR (Child Observation Record) Training	<Restore new and refresher training for Head Start staff in the use of the COR assessment tool	$5,000
Child Day Care Fee System	<Fund the costs of the current waiting list[1] for all of FY 2008, assuming no rate increases	$1,111,656[2]

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[1] The waiting list on October 6 stood at 364 children. However, based on prior experience with Fee System waiting lists, DHS projects that only 50% or 182 children would actually follow through and be eligible.
[2] This amount includes the $384,000 in state cuts plus the projected increase in caseload based on the current waiting list.

2) *That the City and Schools launch a concerted outreach effort to attract all families with at-risk children to the K-Prep and that K-Prep continue to be a priority*

The K-Prep program of the Alexandria City Public Schools is entering its third year and offers a two week pre-kindergarten experience during mid-August that is targeted to children who have not had a preschool experience. An evaluation of this program, utilizing the PALS (Phonemic Awareness Literacy Screening), indicates that children who participate in the Pre-K program score higher on the PALS than those who have not participated in any Pre-K experience. This is a good intermediate step pending development of full-time programs but is not currently reaching the most at-risk population. ACPS has indicated that they need assistance in: 1) identifying and recruiting children who have not had a preschool experience; and 2) in identifying and overcoming barriers that prevent these families from having access to this or other Pre-K programs.

3) *That the Early Childhood Commission enabling ordinance be amended to expand and reorganize the membership to meet Alexandria's needs for a local coordinating group as required to receive funding through the State Start Strong Council and the Smart Beginnings collaboration with the Virginia Early Childhood Foundation and to ensure that the Commission's focus continues to be on children, birth to 8 years of age, and their families*

The funding recommendations of the Start Strong Council are expected to include a requirement that local councils be established to include a broader range of representatives from the community than the current Alexandria Early Childhood Commission (ECC) includes. This recommendation anticipates that requirement and moves to begin the process now so that, when funding becomes available, Alexandria will be ready to act. Alexandria should also review the three models that were funded in the first year of the Smart Beginnings Early Childhood Foundation grant process to explore options for the city in the next round of proposals.

Although the goal of the Start Strong Council is to serve all four-year-olds, the Work Group feels that it is important to maintain the focus of their work on children from birth to age eight because research clearly shows that young children learn differently from older children and that early intervention starting at birth and the provision of developmentally appropriate education and support services to children and families through age eight produces the best outcomes. Alexandria currently helps fund and support several programs that serve at-risk children starting prenatally, such as Healthy Families Alexandria, Early Head Start and Alexandria Resource Mothers.

4) That the Universal Access to Preschool Work Group continue with its work until such time as the ECC is reorganized and its work can be fully transferred to the Early Childhood Commission

The Work Group feels that their membership provides a broader representation than the ECC as it is currently constituted (Attachment 4) and that they could continue to provide valuable insight into the process until the membership of the ECC is broadened to include representatives of currently funded programs, community activists, decision makers, policy makers, local politicians and more members of the business community.

5) That the reorganized Early Childhood Commission develop a five-year plan for approval of the City Council and the School Board that will allow the City, the Schools and their early childhood partners to provide universal access to preschool for three and four year olds and provide comprehensive services to all families with children prenatal to eight who are in need of such services in order to be successful and to thrive within the City schools and the Alexandria community as a whole

The Work Group believes that all children should have access to high quality early care and education programs. However, they also realize that funding is limited and that the first priority should be to provide access to preschool programs to three and four year old at-risk children with a longer term, five-year plan to develop programs that will include all children. They also believe that comprehensive early intervention services should be available to at-risk children and their families, beginning in the prenatal period, through age eight, because intervention that begins at age three or four may be too late to provide the positive outcomes of success in school and in life.

The Work Group also realizes that it will take time to:

- gather and analyze data to develop a better understanding of the problem
- fully develop an early childhood education program that is aligned with the kindergarten through 12 curriculum
- identify a sustainable phased-in financial plan and renewable funding streams
- align the local plan with state and federal initiatives

EXISTING PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

The early childhood programs referred to in this section include part-day, part-year preschools and full-day, full-year programs that are referred to as child care centers. Both generally provide either a three- or six-hour core program each day with an established curriculum. In addition, child care centers offer child care services both before and after the core program for a total of ten or more hours per day. Some early childhood programs provide additional services to families

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and children, including but not limited to medical, vision and dental screenings and services, mental health screenings and services, family support services, social skills groups, parent education, parent involvement activities, family literacy activities and ESL classes.

Early care and education services in Alexandria are provided through a complex network of programs and services, with multiple funding streams. Most at-risk children are served by full-day programs, some of which are open from September through June. However, most are either open year-round or offer a smaller summer program to accommodate the needs of working parents. Many preschools also provide scholarships for families. The full range of programs available to families is shown in the matrix included as Attachment 5.

Alexandria has 33 child care centers, 17 preschools and 200 family child care providers with a total capacity of 3,684. Most preschools are located in the Old Town and Beverly Hills area of the City as shown in the GIS maps in Attachment 6. Most centers are located in the eastern end of the city. Family child care providers are divided fairly equally between the east and west end. Approximately 65% of all centers that serve at-risk children are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a percentage far higher than the national average of 8% and State average of 7%.

GAPS IN SERVICES

Alexandria has in place a system of early intervention services, quality early childhood education programs and comprehensive services for children from birth to the age of five. Participating programs strongly encourage parent participation in their child's education because parent involvement is one of the primary indicators of school success. The full system with numbers of children served, slots available in programs, and waiting lists is described in greater detail in Attachment 5.

Unfortunately, funding for early childhood programs has not expanded and, in some cases, has begun to recede. The Children's Fund has not received an infusion of new funds, other than an occasional cost of living increase, since it was first established in 1993. Foundations that have provided long term funding for many of Alexandria's programs have begun to look to funding programs in other localities or have changed their funding priorities. Non-profits have all suffered to one degree or the other from donor fatigue as a result of Katrina and other disasters worldwide. As recently as May 9, the Virginia Department of Social Services notified localities of an 82% cut in funding for one of the Fee System budget lines that will result in 52 fewer children being served if the funding is not restored. On the positive side, funding is available in the 2007 state budget for early childhood programs and the governor has appointed the Start Strong Council to develop a plan for universal pre-K.

IDENTIFICATION OF NEED

Census data from 2000 indicated that there were 7,962 children under the age of five living in the City of Alexandria. Adjustments at the midpoint of the ten year census cycle indicate that the current number falls between seven and nine thousand. Data gathered by the Alexandria City Public Schools for children entering kindergarten in the fall of 2005 (Attachment 7) indicates that the parents of 281 (28%) children reported that their child had not participated in an organized preschool program prior to entering public school. Seven percent of parents did not respond to this question, which means that as many as 350 children may not have had a preschool experience.

The school system experiences a 35% turnover in student enrollment between the beginning and the end of the school year. Therefore, approximately 123 of those 350 children might not have lived in Alexandria the year before, leaving 227 children that the City might have reached with a preschool program or other resource had slots and/or funding been available.

ACPS data from the 2004-2005 school year also indicates that almost twice as many Hispanic students who participated in a preschool program or Head Start the year before entry into kindergarten passed the fall 2004 PALS (Phonemic Awareness Literacy Screening) than those who did not. The same is true for students with limited English proficiency. At-risk children (those eligible for free or reduced price lunch) who had a full-day preschool experience or Head Start passed the PALS at a rate 21 percentage points higher than those who did not.

ACPS recently completed a profile of 2005-2006 kindergarten students whose parents had reported that their children had not had a preschool experience (Attachment 7). Some of the highlights of the report were:

- 35% of the entering kindergartners in the 2005 -2006 class had no structured preschool experience
- Families whose children were not enrolled in preschool prior to entering ACPS in the fall of 2005 were clustered along the western border of the city, on the east and west sides of northern Mount Vernon Avenue and along central Duke Street.
- Students in home care settings were disproportionately Hispanic, speak a language other than English and are classified as disadvantaged using the proxy of free and reduced price lunch status.
- Students in home care were less prepared to enter school, i.e. they scored 10 -26 points below that of students with other types of pre-kindergarten experience on the PALS (Phonological Awareness of Literacy Screening) and were less likely to attend the Kindergarten Prep program.

- Students with no preschool experience had less successful first years in school; they were more likely to be retained in kindergarten (8%) and referred to summer school (40%).

One of the report's recommendations was to "develop specific educational programs, resources and support for students and their families who enroll in kindergarten with no preschool experience."

QUALITY

Although between 65-70% of child care centers serving at-risk children have demonstrated quality by accreditation through NAEYC, there are still several centers serving at-risk children that are not accredited and the level of quality in family child care continues to be very uneven. Eligibility for local dollars can be tied to accreditation. However, CCDF regulations require that localities allow parents to choose from any legally operating child care program, regardless of quality. Parents are encouraged to inform their decisions by accessing the VaDSS licensing website at www.dss.virginia.gov/facility/search/licensed.cgi which lists the complaints and compliance issues for each licensed center and family child care provider.

Almost 500 at-risk children, from birth to age five, were served in family child care homes in Alexandria in FY 2006, including many four-year-olds. Families choose family child care even when center-based care is available, for a variety of reasons, including the need for care during non-traditional hours, the flexibility of home-based care and the relationships they establish with their providers. Therefore, it is imperative that family child providers develop their skills so they can provide quality care.

The Office for Early Childhood Development (OECD) is responsible for the implementation of the City's child care ordinance which sets minimum standards for family child care providers, including a six-hour yearly training requirement. Providers who wish to contract with the agency for CCDF funds must also complete a 45-hour course developed in collaboration with NVCC. While attending the course, providers are partnered with mentors who help providers put into practice the early childhood theory learned in the course. Providers who have a city permit and have completed the NVCC course are listed on the City's web site at www.alexandriava.gov/dhs/children_and_youth_services/oecd_Child_Care_Provider_List.html.

The OECD has historically provided extensive training and workshops for providers and has recently developed a course jointly with Northern Virginia Community College that addresses the diversity of the provider population. They have used mentors to follow-up with providers to reinforce the learning, with what appears to be excellent results in the development of provider competencies.

The OECD will be working with NVCC in the fall to develop an evaluation plan for this effort. Another strategy for improving the quality of family child care would be to establish a tiered system of rates that reward quality care as measured by research-based, validated observation tools. Another benefit for providers would be that they could use the tiered system to advertise their services and attract customers.

TRANSITION FROM PRE-K TO KINDERGARTEN
"Making sure schools are ready for children."

Any discussion of increased access to Pre-K programs for at-risk children includes the goal of children's readiness for school. Less often do we talk about the need for schools to be made ready for children. The Harvard Family Research Project, in a 2002 review of research and practices, states that "The literature on early intervention provides a strong rationale for the importance of continuity in the transition from early childhood to school age settings. Early intervention research suggests that participants' early gains, especially cognitive gains, fade as they move through primary grades (Shore, 1998). This drop-off may be attributed, at least in part, to dramatic differences between parent involvement, classroom organization, and teaching style in early care and education programs and in elementary schools (O'Brien, 1991)."

In 1998 the National Education Goals Panel outlined 10 keys to "ready schools" that included continuity between preschool programs and elementary schools and strong transition programs from home to school. Research has shown that strong transition projects, such as those in some local Head Start programs, counteract the "fade-out effect" that is often seen in Head Start children by the third grade.

Although Alexandria has a variety of transition programs in place for Head Start children and for children from some private programs, there is no coordinated plan in place for all children. The K Prep program provides an opportunity for children whose parents are aware of the program and take advantage of it and has proven to have excellent outcomes for children. However, this excellent program is still missing many of the most at-risk children. The existing transition program components could be better integrated into the preschool initiative which would then provide better access for at-risk families to information about programs such as K Prep and increase the participation of kindergarten teachers in transition activities.

CONCLUSION

Research has shown that the best outcomes for children result from positive early childhood experiences and early intervention services from birth to age eight. The ideal plan would provide these services to all children. However, because funding resources are limited, the recommendations in this report target

services for at-risk children and families who would not otherwise have the opportunity to participate.

The Work Group recommends that the community provide access to a variety of services ranging from home-based services and play groups for the youngest children to intensive home visiting services for the most at-risk families and, finally, preschool experiences for three and four year olds. To ensure that children have the opportunity to participate, it is vital that parents and the community at-large be educated about the importance of early childhood experiences.

Data gathered by the Work Group would seem to indicate that there are sufficient slots in centers, preschools and child care centers for preschool age children in Alexandria but experience has shown that many of these slots are taken up by school age children and not all of the slots are of high quality. Research has demonstrated that the quality of early childhood programs is as important as their accessibility in achieving the outcome of children entering school ready to learn. The city is also at risk of losing many of these slots because of the lack of available facilities and the loss of funding.

To assist City Council and the School Board in making funding decisions during the FY 2008 budget process, the Work Group has prepared a chart (Attachment 8) which provides information regarding the unit(s) of service provided by each program, the cost of each and the minimum group size that represents the most cost efficient delivery of that particular service.